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Conversations on Born-Digital Materials in the Archives Field

From my conversation with Cara Howe for the interview assignment, I have been considering the significance of born-digital materials. At the surface it appears that the major difference between born-digital materials and their analog, three-dimensional equivalents is a simple matter of format. However, in considering the implications of born-digital materials it becomes evident that the emphasis should be placed how the objects were *born*, rather than the format in which they are manifested. While analog materials can be digitized, the creation of digital surrogates does not erase the existence of the original object—the analog item remains in need of preservation and storage. Born-digital materials are infinitely reproducible and can be retained in large quantities, with important implications for provenance and preservation considerations—impacting the archival field as a whole.

This fundamental expansion of archival practice has led to an intriguing conversation within the profession. I have chosen to focus on the “Born-Digital Records” category archives of the Society of American Archivists’ *Off the Record* blog.¹ The president of the SAA serves as the principal blogger for *Off the Record*, which functions as “an informal communication channel on which conversations can take place about ongoing SAA activities and issues, as well other topics of broad interest to archivists.”² There are four articles listed under “Born-Digital Records,” which collectively demonstrate the diversity of considerations for the archival profession.

¹ The articles are available via: <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/category/born-digital-records/>

² “About this Blog,” *Off the Record*, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/about/>.

The earliest article, from November 20, 2012, fittingly bears the title “*Jump in* and take your first steps for managing born-digital content!” and was written by SAA Council member Bill Landis.³ The article lacks any direct information on how to approach born-digital materials; instead it offers an overview of the conception and execution of the Jump In initiative from an administrative standpoint. Interestingly, the initiative grew from the conversation surrounding the OCLC Research report “You’ve Got to Walk Before You Can Run: First Steps for Managing Born Digital Content Received on Physical Media”—demonstrating the inter-organizational interplay surrounding born-digital materials.⁴ Targeted at institutions without electronic records programs, SAA intended for Jump In to help incentivize organizations to take those first steps.

The next article, “Riding the Wave of Digital Information,” written by Danna Bell, then-president of the SAA, offers a similar focus on inter-organizational dialogue. SAA collaborated with the Association of Research Libraries to offer Digital Archives Specialization courses to their members. Bell commends archivists for leading the way forward in developing care plans for born-digital materials. Ellen Knight, responding in the comments section, brings attention to the Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB). This organization exemplifies the tension between preservation, access, privacy and security. Archivists certainly need to play a role in educating and advocating for the proper care of born-digital materials across related fields.

³ Bill Landis, “*Jump in* and take your first steps for managing born-digital content!” *On the Road*, November 20, 2012, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/2012/11/20/jump-in-and-take-your-first-steps-for-managing-born-digital-content/>.

⁴ Ricky Erway, “You’ve Got to Walk Before You Can Run: First Steps for Managing Born-Digital Content Received on Physical Media,” *OCLC Research*, June 2012, Accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2012/2012-06.pdf>.

Continuing the advocacy discussion, William Lazorchak's article "With UELMA, Lots of Legislation Keeps Stuff Safe" explores avenues for conveying the value of the Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act.⁵ UELMA dictates "that official electronic legal material be: (1) authenticated, by providing a method to determine that it is unaltered; (2) preserved, either in electronic or print form; and (3) accessible, for use by the public on a permanent basis."⁶ Lazorchak rightly suggests using the language of legislators when advocating for UELMA, as opposed to focusing more narrowly on preservation justifications. This approach can and should be applied more broadly in advocacy initiatives; to avoid preaching to the choir archivists need to frame their arguments in terms applicable outside the profession.

The most recent article listed in this category, "The Library of Congress presents Recommended Format Specifications," encourages readers to review the new specifications.⁷ While little more than a redirect to the Library of Congress page, this article demonstrates the need for standardization and best practices documentation in managing digital collections. It also highlights the role of major institutions such as the Library of Congress in setting those standards. Since the practice of preserving born-digital materials is still in its infancy, we can expect to see further updates in this documentation over the coming years.

In surveying these posts in SAA's *Off the Record* blog, several themes persist: advocacy, collaboration, stewardship, and standardization all factor heavily into born-digital collections management. Archivists need to be prepared to look outward in charting the future course of

⁵ William Lazorchak, "With UELMA, Lots of Legislation Keeps Stuff Safe," *Off the Record*, May 8, 2014, accessed April 8, 2015, <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/2014/05/08/with-uelma-lots-of-legislation-keeps-stuff-safe/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Danna C. Bell, "The Library of Congress presents Recommended Format Specifications," *Off the Record*, July 18, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/2014/07/18/the-library-of-congress-presents-recommended-format-specifications/>.

the field. While the profession continues to grapple with the implications of born-digital materials, explaining these issues to outside stakeholders becomes increasingly important. By working together, archivists can maintain their role as stewards of cultural heritage resources, regardless of their format or origins.